

Hard years for the Baltics

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Postprint / Postprint

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Khudolei, K. (2013). Hard years for the Baltics. [Review of the book *Прибалтика: война без правил (1939-1945)* / *The Baltics: a war without rules (1939-1945)*, by J. Z. Kantor]. *Baltic Region*, 1, 101-105. <https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2013-1-10>

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REVIEWS



HARD YEARS FOR THE BALTICS¹

**Кантор Ю. Прибалтика: война без правил (1939—1945).
(Kantor Yu. The Baltics: a war without rules (1939—1945))
СПб.: Звезда, 2011. 336 с.**

Today, when the globalising world of the 21st century is undergoing rapid changes, historical issues remain an important factor affecting the development of international relations. Their effect can be positive: countries and people united by the ties of long-standing friendship treat each other with mutual respect and trust; it is easier for them to find the ways to solve arising problems. However, the past is tainted by wars and conflicts between countries and peoples; therefore, if they treated each other unfairly, it can create a negative background for the perception of each other in modern conditions and lead to distrust and suspicion. It is especially pronounced in the cases when relations between states are still dominated by unresolved problems. Unfortunately, it is the case in relations between Russia and its neighbours — the Baltics. In such a situation, of special importance are profound and well-grounded studies conducted by historians free of the influence of the current political struggle. One of such works is the book by the advisor to the director of the State Hermitage, Prof Yu. Z. Kantor.

An important advantage of Yu. Kantor's work is its strong primary source base. First of all, it is archive materials. The author uses documents from the Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, Russian State Naval Archive, Central Archive of the Federal Security Service, as well as Estonian State Archives, Latvian State Historical Archives, Lithuanian Special Archives, and the Archives of the Lithuanian Emigration Institute at the University of Kaunas. It is noteworthy that it is the first time some of these materials have been used for research purposes.

Yu. Kantor found a number of new interesting materials in Russian archives. However, what is more important, she is a pioneer in studying the archives of the Baltic States. Thus, Yu. Kantor became one of the first scholars having worked at the archives of the Lithuanian Emigration Institute of the University of Kaunas, whose documents are undoubtedly among the most interesting ones in the book.

The book under review consists of three chapters, each has a short and succinct title: "From *Baltia* to the Baltics", "Territory *Ostland*", and "The Baltics again". These names accurately mark out the hard road the peoples of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia went in the years of WWII.

The first chapter considers the course of events in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in pre-war years and the first period of WWII. At the time, the Baltic States were governed by the authoritarian regimes of A. Smetona, K. Ukmanis, and K. Pāts. It was not a coincidence, but rather a logical development of the situation. In the 1920—30s, similar regimes were established in almost all countries that gained independence after WWI, except for Czechoslovakia and Finland. The reasons behind it were the virtual absence of urban middle classes, lack of experience of political elites, non-existent democratic traditions, aggravation of internal political struggle under the influence of the world economic crisis of the late 1920s-20s, and a number of other factors.

Yu. Kantor is right to define the Baltic dictatorships as authoritarian ones. It is of importance, since a number of contemporary works still call them fascist regimes, not unlike the Comintern times. A distinctive trait of Baltic dictators was that, unlike many other authoritarian regimes, they had little room for manoeuvres in the field of international relations. Although Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were oriented towards the League of Nations and Western powers and strived to pursue a policy of neutrality following the Scandinavian example, in effect, they were forced to manoeuvre between the Soviet Union and Germany, both of which opposed the Versailles-Washington system. Cooperation between the three Baltic States was also reduced to minimum.

The author rightfully emphasises that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which became in effect the “second round” of the Munich Conspiracy of 1938, shaped the destiny of the Baltic States for decades to come (p. 6). The work pays particular attention to the events that took place in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in the autumn of 1939 — spring of 1940, as well as the Soviet policy towards the Baltics. It is well known that, in Russian historiography, there are two perspectives on the changes that took place in the Baltics in the summer of 1940. According to the first one, those changes, and the incorporation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia into the USSR, happened at the will of the peoples and according to the then rules of international law. The adherents of the other perspective give an opposite assessment to these processes. Yu. Kantor takes the second position and puts forward serious arguments in its favour.

The second chapter devoted to the period of German occupation of the Baltics in 1941—1944 apparently proves the most important and interesting one, since it employs the largest number of archive materials studied by the author. Yu. Kantor describes in detail the policy of Hitlerite occupants, their arrogance towards the Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians, who, if not subject to elimination like Jews, but were not considered equal either, undergoing mass repressions. The author does not neglect the issue of local collaborationists, their role in the course of Hitlerite policy, including their contribution to the reign of terror. Emphasising the cruelty of occupants, Yu. Kantor also admits that the anti-fascism resistance — despite the accounts of Soviet historiography — was rather weak. Another important detail is that the book shows the particularities of the then situation in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. All in all, the analysis of the 1941—1944 period in

Yu. Kantor's study has a number of advantages over similar publications, since it offers not superficial speculations, but rather a deep insight based on profound knowledge of the factual aspect.

The third chapter is devoted to the period of 1944—1945, when, after German troops had been forced out, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia became a platform for the process which Yu. Kantor aptly calls “re-sovietisation” (p. 243). It concerns the strengthening of the Union's centralized power over the Baltic republics, which cherished hopes for greater independence, and the introduction of Soviet ways in all spheres of life, including those the Soviet authorities did not manage to “penetrate” in the autumn — spring of 1940—1941, for example, mass collectivisation. This policy line was pursued with the severest and cruellest methods typical of Stalin's time. Of course, it sparked off resistance, which was stronger and more large-scale than that in 1940—1941. It is only natural that, when considering these issues, Yu. Kantor refers to the earlier events.

The book under review also contains a number of contentious assumptions.

Firstly, the question as to how, out of four countries that found themselves in the Soviet-controlled area, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia — unlike Finland — did not launch armed resistance either in 1939 or 1940, is poorly studied by Russian historiography. Of course, an important factor was a less favourable geographical position (Finland had neutral, but sympathising Sweden in the rear), lack of military and technological preparation (the Baltics had nothing even remotely resembling the “Mannerheim line”), but the main reason was different. Yu. Kantor rightfully stresses that the authoritative policy of A. Smetona, K. Ulmanis, and K. Päts generated an “internal crisis” (p. 20), which smothered resistance, but the main emphasis is placed on that the “ability to value independence and defend it” was not sufficiently developed in the Baltics (p. 20). One can agree that national identity was more pronounced in Finland than in the Baltic, although it is worth noting that a part of population and servicemen, especially in Estonia, were ready to fight. The policy of the Baltic dictators was shaped by the fear of their own peoples — hence, the aspiration to maintain power through different agreements with the Soviet Union. The Baltic dictators deemed this way more reliable than an armed struggle with unpredictable results.

Secondly, it seems that completely different points should be brought to the fore when analysing international reaction to changes in the Baltic.

The sovietisation of West Belarus and Ukraine started right after the Red Army had entered their territories. Almost immediately after the Soviet offensive against Finland, the “people's” government of O. Kuusinen was established for the same purpose, but Moscow did not take any steps towards the sovietisation. Yu. Kantor relates it to the unwillingness of the USSR to “sour relations with England and France and the uncertain prospects of the war in Europe” (p. 39). In my opinion, the main reason behind Moscow's restraint was the position of Germany. As one of the leaders of NKVD, P. Sudoplatov, recalls, it was what V.M. Molotov talked about in October 1939 at a meeting on the issues of Soviet policy in the Baltics. At the same

time, V.M. Molotov emphasised the need to create such a situation, when the peoples of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia would overthrow the bourgeois system on their own. After a break caused by the war with Finland, which lasted longer than it had been planned by the Soviet leadership, the Comintern attempted to activate communist parties of the Baltics in the spring of 1940, but to no avail. The German victories of May-June 1940 on the western front frightened J. Stalin, who had to change the tactics again and resort to an open invasion in June 1940.

The reaction of western powers to the events taking place in the Baltics in the summer of 1940 was not homogeneous. The UK, fighting a war against Hitler on its own, welcomed Soviet troops. Washington expressed its displeasure, but much more mildly than in case of the offensive against Finland. Trying not to sour relations with the Soviet Union, western powers were (as certain signs indicated) ready to deal with the “people’s” governments of the Baltics, which were formed under the Soviet direction. However, they categorically refused to acknowledge the sovietisation of the Baltics. Of certain interests is the behaviour of foreign diplomats, who visited the first sitting of the Estonian Parliament, which had been elected and functioned according to the Soviet model, on July 21, 1940. They listened to the *Internationale*, which was performed instead of the anthem of — technically — still independent Estonia; they were present at the establishment of parliament committees, but left the session in protest when the issues of declaring Estonia a Soviet Socialist Republic and its incorporation into the USSR were put on the agenda.

In my opinion, Yu. Kantor’s statement that during WWII and after it, “the West acknowledged the right of the Soviet Union to the Baltics *de facto*, by default” (p. 243) seems questionable. I believe that the situation was less unambiguous. Of course, in the course of WWII, the Baltic issue was not a priority, but it was not totally neglected either. So, in May 1942, London refused to include the clause on acknowledging the USSR within the 1941 borders into the Soviet-British Alliance Treaty, which meant, in particular, *de jure* recognition of the incorporation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia into the USSR; J. Stalin was forced to concede. In December 1943, during the Tehran Conference, F.D. Roosevelt had a conversation with J. Stalin about the possibility of holding free elections and a referendum in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, although the conversation was of most general nature.

After WWII, the attitude hardly changed. The doctrines of “containment of communism” and “rollback of communism”, which were the priority lines of Western policy at the early stages of the Cold War, suggested that the USSR return to the borders of 1939, i.e. those excluding Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. In the 1960s-70s, western states started to exhibit certain differences. For instance, Great Britain and some other Western European states agreed to settle property disputes that resulted from the sovietisation of the Baltics in 1940, which can be considered their *de facto* acknowledgement. The USA, Canada and a number of other western countries did not take that step. The cases of *de jure* recognition of the incorporation of Li-

thuania, Latvia, and Estonia into the USSR were of isolated nature (the Netherlands, France). Prior to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki, 1975), the President of the United States, G. Ford, emphasised that the signing of the Final Act does not mean recognition of the incorporation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia into the USSR.

Thirdly, Yu. Kantor writes that, in 1946, the Baltic republics ceased to be the “zone of turmoil” and “turned into something of an affluent, by Soviet measurement, “showcase of socialism” (p. 286).

I believe that it happened later — after the death of J. Stalin and the XX Congress of the CPSU. Resistance to Soviet practices was insignificant from the start. Even profound studies of the Soviet period acknowledged that, even before the German offensive against the USSR, the Baltics were a site of a “small-scale civil war”. The struggle against re-sovietisation was waged on a larger scale. The guerrilla and underground movements could not be suppressed solely by repressions. It made the CPSU leadership change their policy line in the mid-1950s: Baltic nationals were granted access to the party/governmental, economic, and intellectual elite, the standards of living exceeded the Soviet average, and certain “liberties” were allowed in the field of culture. It soothed general population and became a prerequisite for the development of the image of the Baltics as the “Soviet West”. In my opinion, J. Stalin learnt his lessons from the sovietisation of the Baltics in 1940 and the post-war sovietisation of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In the latter, communist practices were introduced in a milder form — that of people’s democracy, — which was rather similar to what certain left-winged circles of the Baltics requested from the Soviet leadership in summer 1940.

Naturally, these issues do not downplay the general impression from Yu. Kantor’s book and rather makes one think of new lines of research on this important and very complex topic.

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